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SUBJECT: Embassy Tirana Weekly Report

Energy Superpower or Super Colony?

1. The visit of the Italian PM Berlusconi earlier this month attracted a lot of attention for good and for bad. During the short visit both Berlusconi and Prime Minister Berisha hailed the current bilateral relationship. They agreed on further intensifying economic ties, particularly energy and agriculture, as well as increased cooperation in the education, culture and health sectors. The GOA signed four agreements with Italian companies for infrastructure projects. Two of them in the energy sector worth US\$ 2.7 billion represent the largest projects approved in recent years. One is a degasification plant located in the coastal areas near Fier and an adjacent undersea gas pipeline with a capacity of 4 billion cubic meters per day. The other is a wind farm with 100 turbines on the Karaburun Peninsula. The GOA also signed a contract with a Norwegian company for the construction of three hydropower plants in the Devolli River in southern Albania. Almost all of the electricity generated by these projects will be exported to Italy.

2. Apart from PM Berisha, who giddily boasted that the planned projects would turn Albania into a regional "energy superpower," the proposed Italian investments generated little excitement and instead stirred up controversy. The proposed wind farm on the Karaburun Peninsula has raised a lot of concern among civil society representatives because of its environmental effects. The project is located near a protected national park, and the entire area is unspoiled due to its complete isolation. The opposition also called on the government to make the profit and the cost of these large projects transparent to the Albanian people. On the other hand, PM Berisha hailed the events and said that these projects are part of a larger plan to turn Albania into a major energy exporter in the region. In mid-December, the GOA signed another large contract worth US\$ 1.4 billion with Austrian and Norwegian companies for the construction of three hydropower plants in the Devolli River in southern Albania.

3. While moving yet one step closer to reality, these projects might still fall within the category of a mirage in the desert, and are unlikely to happen, at least in the short to mid term. These announcements were only the latest in a long series of grandiose planned projects, unveiled by the GOA to much fanfare but then slowly fading from the headlines as follow-up action never takes place. It is obvious that due to not-in-my-backyard concerns, the Italians will have the incentive to move forward faster this time, and Albania is in desperate need for foreign investments and new sources of electricity generation. However, there is also growing public dissent against these projects, which in the public mind turn Albania less into a superpower and more into a colony of its neighbors.

A Room of One's Own

4. A generally overlooked aspect of the new electoral code is a quota system for women candidates, aimed at improving women's participation in politics and representation in parliament. Unfortunately, this quota system is more band-aid than cure and tends to underestimate the level of independence women ought to experience in their private sphere in order to be successful in their political undertakings.

5. In a patriarchal society such as Albania, women are relegated to the household or the private sphere, where there is little room for their own self, while men to the public one. As a result, relationships between women and men, and later on even amongst people of the same sex, are built based on the win-lose principle or of the conqueror and the conquered.

6. Women's participation in the public sphere is rather limited to their sexuality. Such examples can be observed everywhere. If you are a woman driver, you are reminded at least once a day about your supposedly limited driving abilities. In the workplace, the lunch tables are often divided based on sex as men sit and talk about "important" political and economic issues while women talk about dresses, hair and makeup, and gossip about others. In addition, living on your own when your parents live in the same city can be considered rather strange and inappropriate. Many landlords often ask whether you are on good terms with your family, for they don't understand why in the world would a young woman want to live on her own. Gender becomes the glue that holds together most of the human interactions in our daily life.

7. Although in the public sphere decisions are often made by male politicians to introduce gender quotas in order to promote women in politics, these are rather short-term and short-envisioned solutions. Even though we can find many band aids to publicly solve problems caused by Albania's strongly patriarchal system, they will

not provide a long-term and sustainable solution for many Albanian women in their daily life. As a consequence, they will fail, hence undermining feminist efforts for a fair and equal society for men and women.